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22 March 1979

Memorandum for Review Panel

Subject: Too Much Focus on Incidents?

1. Over the last few weeks, I noted an estimative problem that may merit consideration by the Panel. It occurred to me in relation to the estimative effort on Iran, but has, I think, broader application.

2. The crucial development under way in Iran at the present time, and probably for some time to come, is the messy process of reconstituting a central and effective government in the country. Whatever the eventual result of this process, it will impinge importantly on US interests in the Middle East. Yet, following the exciting series of events culminating in the return of Khomeini, I have seen no evidence of estimative efforts focusing on this key subject.

3. Aside from a few background pieces, information on the main studies of the oil problem and concern over the left wing of the revolutionary forces, intelligence attention has been absorbed by particular incidents, such as large demonstrations, executions, and unrest among the Kurds and other ethnic minorities.

4. In other words, the intelligence effort seems to be largely, and probably excessively, incident-oriented. There may be ample reasons accounting for this orientation: incidents are immediately challenging, consumers may want to know about them, and they generate some immediate information.

5. The question is whether the overemphasis on incidents in this orientation represents a sound allocation of estimative resources. It may well be true that paying more attention to the basic process of state and political development is discouraged by a dearth of information, the tentative nature of this evolution and the speculative nature of its analysis. However, I have also noticed that the better newspapers, though also incident-oriented, are more enterprising in covering the on-going revolution even though they labor under the same handicaps.

6. My tentative feeling is that this orientation is not limited to the Iranian case. The disadvantage of this orientation is not only that much intelligence work tends to be episodic, but also that it increases our chances of being surprised. Incidents themselves are usually

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surprising. If more attention were paid to processes that produce incidents, we might well be better prepared for them, and the policy-maker would be less often relegated to a purely reactive role.

7. Some intelligence production, of course, is not, or is much less, incident-oriented, especially NIE's and IIM's. But they represent a relatively minor proportion of intelligence output.



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